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ALTERNATIVE ENGLISH

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RAJ KSHMR™

Edited by
Bibhash Choudhury

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Alternative English

For FYUGP | AEC
Arts, Commerce, Science
Gauhati University
Semester I

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Sarojini Naidu
The Palanquin Bearers

Lightly, O lightly we bear her along,
She sways like a flower in the wind of our song;
She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream,
She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream.
Gaily, O gaily we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string.

Softly, O softly we bear her along,
She hangs like a star in the dew of our song;
She springs like a beam on the brow of the tide,
She falls like a tear from the eyes of a bride.
Lightly, O lightly we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string.

Notes:

sways: to move from side to side

skims: to move on the surface

Commentary:

“Palanquin Bearers” is one of Sarojini Naidu’s most anthologized poems. It encompasses the ambience of an era when society was highly hierarchized. The division of work was conventionally done in accordance with ability and class situation. The nobility occupied the upper echelons of society and determined the structuring of the classes. The nature of work was devised and determined in such a way that encompassed the different people of society in a balanced way. How far the rights were looked into in the stratification of society is a matter open to evaluation. What is evident, however, is that the social hierarchy that was in place, at most times, reflected equilibrium. In Sarojini Naidu’s poem the experience of the palanquin bearers is taken up as the subject of representation.

The poem opens with the palanquin bearers articulating their movement as they carry the weight on their shoulders. Accustomed to carrying the

palanquin on a regular basis, these bearers present a rhythm in the course of the movement that they make. As they move forward, they refer to the palanquin as a delicate object which they bear with ease. The choice of words suggest an ease of movement and nowhere is it indicated that the palanquin is a burden to them. It is a source of happiness and the sense of enjoyment at work is clearly evident in the song that they hum as they march forward. Both the stanzas of the poem present the rhythmic movement of the palanquin bearers and the exuberance with which they go about their task shows the comforting nature of the exercise. They are conscious of the need to be careful with the palanquin which is reflected in the way they conduct themselves. Irrespective of the path that they traverse, the palanquin is carried with the same ease and there is no change in the mode of carriage. A sense of light-heartedness comes through in the poem and the ambience that is created represents a situation where nothing is altered.

Naidu uses repetition as a poetic device to enhance the effect in the poem. The words are arranged in different combinations to bring about the experience which depicts the mood of the palanquin


bearers. The fact that this is a choric song and not the voice of an individual provides it a sense of credibility. The collective first-person voice presents the situation not in terms of a particular occasion but suggests the nature of work which is regularly done. The song that they sing is in the form of an anthem and the collective voice is organised to articulate the essence of felt experience. Naidu's choice of words and the mode of arrangement contributes to the rhythmic effect of the verse. In the true spirit of the song that the palanquin bearers sing, the musical dimension has a lingering impact which resonates throughout the poem. ○

Sujata Bhatt
So Many Oaks

In this forest we stand among ancient trees.
So many oaks. Holy. An evil witch would kill them.
The windows of that house are so bright, so clean –
Who lives there? A woman who lost five sons in the war.
Birds have feathers but mammals have none.
A pity because I would really like to fly.
Human beings have eyes and ears
but some are born blind or deaf.
The flowers of a plum tree can be red or white.
I have one of each in my garden.
My hat is brown. My gloves are brown.
A practical colour.

Commentary

“So Many Oaks” by Sujata Bhatt is an observation on the delicate relationship between humanity and Nature. The seeming simplicity of the poem layers the complex and interwoven dimensions of human behaviour and its impact on society and the world we live in. The poem begins with an image of a forest which has ‘many oaks.’ Oak trees are known for their ancientness, especially because a forest that has oaks is known to have a flourishing ecosystem. Oaks are also diverse and there are a variety of oak trees. This aspect of the oak species is significant because Sujata Bhatt uses it as a metaphor to highlight the distinctive character of individuals whom she likens to oaks in the poem. In the first line of the poem, the speaker refers to a wide forest space which has many trees of ancient origin. It suggests that the land being referred to is not newly forested but has been around for a long time. The second line has the three words of the title of the poem: ‘So many oaks.’ As oaks have a very long life-span – the usual time of an oak is said to be more than a century, while some are believed to be more than a millennia – their presence in a forest shows that the same land also has a long history. The fact that there are many oaks in a forest gives the



impression of a shared community space, and although the image is derived from the plant world, it is evident that there is an implicit reference to traditional values in society. The extension of this image of the natural world is significant for the way human beings conduct themselves collectively. Nurturing a heritage brings about a shared sense of collective responsibility. But how far is that shared sense evident either in Nature or in society? In the second line of the poem Bhatt uses the figure of the witch who can be destructive and 'evil' by design and in action. While the oaks are associated with the sense of the holy and the sacred, a destructive force (symbolised by the witch) can cause serious damage to that world. The forest with so many oaks is likened to a sacred grove here, and under the evil eye it could end up being destroyed. The forest and its oaks also resemble a community. Inside this world, things may not be as they appear. In the third line of the poem, the speaker refers to a 'clean' house where the occupant is a woman whose sons have perished in the war. Wars and conflicts disturb the social equilibrium and impact the natural flow of life-activity. When lives are cut short through conflict, it leaves a void in society. Bhatt uses the analogy of birds and mammals to show


the distinction between movement and stasis. The fact that oaks are rooted to the land demonstrate the importance of holding on to the perennial values that are imbibed with time. The speaker laments how she wished she could take flight but without feathers she is not in a position to do so. The contrast between ability and desire is made clear when she states directly in the next two lines where she writes: "Human beings have eyes and ears/but some are born blind or deaf." This contrast has two immediate implications: the first relates to the idea that even with the power to see and listen, some people may not actually act upon what is either visually or auditorily received. The second point being made here that situational or circumstantial occasion – physical condition is one instance –cannot stand in the way of those who are resilient and pursue values. The contrast becomes even clearer when the poem looks at *colour* to show the difference in approach – the use of brown gloves and brown hats can be interpreted as a reflection of the use of a single colour for individual need whereas the in the world of Nature variety is evident. The colours of the flowers of the plum trees in the speaker's garden show how Nature charts its own course. Colour blindness can symbolically imply the inability of human

✓

beings to see beyond their own need and circumstance. The choice of brown as the colour of her gloves and her hat can be associated with the use of leather, which she states to be a 'practical' colour. The focus on practicability is part of the human desire for convenience – and for human convenience and need, the cost of Nature is beyond calculation. If Nature is being plundered, and human societies are being torn apart by conflict, the ancient life-nurturing traditions will have to take the impact. The damage caused by the devastation of Nature may be brought about by some people, but the collective responsibility cannot be avoided. Bhatt refers to the lack of concern of some by giving the example of people who, in spite of having eyes and ears, behave as if they are lacking in their senses. The poem uses colour symbols – brown, red and white – to show the contrast in perception and behaviour. For the world to respond responsibly, the onus is not on a few, but entire humanity. ○

W. B. Yeats
No Second Troy

Why should I blame her that she fill my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?
What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern?
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?



Notes:

of late: the withdrawal of Maud Gonne from politics after the failure of her marriage in 1905

most violent ways: a reference to the different international associations of Maud Gonne and her tacit involvement in the situations as divergent as the Boer War and the Irish Republican Brotherhood

Commentary:

Included in the verse collection *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910), "No Second Troy" brings together myth and contemporary reality onto the same plane. The subject of the poem is the contrast between the sophistication and grace of Maud Gonne on the one hand and the lack of refinement that characterized the modern age. The modern age is seen as one of inadequacy in matters of sincerity and the hypocrisy that is apparent in human behaviour brings the contrast into sharper focus. The title alludes to the figure of Helen and her role in the fall of Troy where her love for Paris leads to catastrophic consequences. Helen was the wife of Menelaus, and she subsequently eloped with Paris, the prince Troy. In the war that followed between the Greeks and the Trojans there were serious casualties on both sides and the whole of Troy lay in ruins. Yeats brings in the figure of Helen to provide both a contrast and a parallel through which he

evaluates the significance of Maud Gonne in contemporary society. The speaker's fascination for her is part of this process of examination, and there is the insistent suggestion that his pursuit of her and inability to win her does not make her insignificant in his eyes. The speaker catalogues the manner in which his desire has been thwarted by her, and what she has done to him is not a singular instance, rather it shows how her maverick nature has affected other men as well. As a woman whose importance in public life is well documented, Maud Gonne's association with the Irish Republican Brotherhood and other international groups highlight her capacity to enthrall through sheer power of personality. It is her suitors who have not been *equal* to her, and her sense of supremacy is not to be seen or assessed as a fault because it is the age where true value is not given its due. As such, the contrast between the heroism that characterized the Classical period is not to be taken as a norm for evaluation of Maud Gonne's worth. Through such a picturization of Maud Gonne is not only assessing her personality from a holistic perspective, he is also looking at the shift in human attitude with the passage of time. The Classical age saw due attention being given to people who were able to take crucial decisions on their own and impact change by means of talent and personality. This is not the case

with the modern age. In Gonne's time, her towering personality and her high qualities are not placed in the appropriate perspective, for which true understanding is not possible. It is not simply about her ability and prowess in public life which remains unappreciated, her beauty too, which makes her stand apart from her peers and contemporaries, is not viewed with the appreciation she would have otherwise received in another age. Yeats' focus on the difference between the modern and the Classical age extends the ambit of the poem beyond the personal history and his relationship with Maud Gonne. It invigorates the complex circumstances in which Yeats lived and sheds light on the changing dynamics of the individual-society equation. In another age, with "beauty like a tightened bow", Maud Gonne would have been perceived and situated differently; in the modern period, no drastic change can be impacted by her as the weight of personality is not enough to alter the course of things in a major way. That is why, even with her remarkable personality and classical beauty, Maud Gonne cannot be like Helen for there is no Troy for her to become the subject she can impact or change. The numerous interrogations that characterize the poem keep the nature of the tension intact and in a way, such a stylistic mode, reflects the troubled times in which Maud Gonne and Yeats lived. ○

Margaret Atwood
This is a Photograph of Me

It was taken some time ago.
At first it seems to be
a smeared
print: blurred lines and grey flecks
blended with the paper;

then, as you scan ..
it, you see in the left-hand corner
a thing that is like a branch: part of a tree
(balsam or spruce) emerging
and, to the right, halfway up
what ought to be a gentle
slope, a small frame house.

In the background there is a lake,
and beyond that, some low hills.

(The photograph was taken
the day after I drowned.

I am in the lake, in the centre
of the picture, just under the surface.
It is difficult to say where
precisely, or to say
how large or small I am:

the effect of water
on light is a distortion —

but if you look long enough,
eventually
you will be able to see me.)

Notes:

flecks: marks

balsam or spruce: balsam refers to either the
balsam tree or its resin; spruce is a coniferous tree

Commentary:

"This is a Photograph of Me" was first published
in Margaret Atwood's verse anthology *The Circle
Game* (1966). Although the poem appears to present

the situation through a first-person narrator, the question of identity complicates both the context and the manner in which the subject is evoked. In the initial movement of the poem, the focus is on the distance between the speaker's memory of the photograph and the moment when that experience is recollected. But as we read on, we become aware of the blurring of the actual and the surreal planes as the speaker refers to her condition in terms of death. Numerous questions emerge in the poem, questions which remain unresolved. For instance, who is the person addressed in the poem? How does the speaker transcend her own death to have a dialogue with another regarding an experience that is captured in a photograph? While an absolutely realistic approach is thwarted by the coming together of the multiple planes of imagination, life and representation, the poem does settle on the issue of identity and perception in a significant way. It is difficult for us to accept the present continuous tense through which the narrative voice refers to various dimensions of the past, because Atwood brings multiple aspects of the speaker's personal history onto plane. The "photograph" recalls the speaker's situation in the past, but it is no ordinary day, but the very last of her life. As the image is viewed at a time later than that when the speaker was clicked, we see different



frames of reality operating here. One of the objectives of such a poetic manoeuvre seems to be to challenge the conventions through which knowledge is understood and approached as final and fixed. As the speaker draws attention to the details of the situation which the photograph has captured, the reader is taken to the centre of the image. But since the picture itself is quite blurred, things *in* it do not emerge in exact terms. In other words, the situation of the photograph suffers because of the passage of time. Or we could perhaps say that time's passage does not apply to the speaker's condition in her posthumous state in the way it did when she was alive. This use of the state of death to emphasize the problems of associated with familiar terms such as time, identity and relationships is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's *Because I Could not Stop for Death*, which, however also accommodates the notion of "immortality" which is absent here. The following observation by Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson encapsulates the circumstance of this poem succinctly: "Atwood offers a disturbing perspective, where foreground and background get confused, and time itself is uncertain. The persona addresses an unidentified 'you' and argues that the background of the photograph, which was taken some time in the past, shows a lake, and within the centre of the lake is the speaker." ○

Mahim Bora Audition

When *basanta* brings the spring festival of Bohag Bihu, the melodious cooing of the *kuli-ketaki* and the shrill cries of domestic birds inspires young men to write poetry, sing songs or whistle a Bihu tune. Prafulla, however, did not do any of these things. In fact, he could not.

Prafulla's greatest ambition was to give a talk on the radio. If not a talk, at least a role in a play. With this desire in mind, he came to Guwahati and stayed with his bosom friend Dipak, a radio announcer. At least once a day he would beg Dipak to talk to the programme executive in charge of the drama section and get him a role. Doorman, guard, rickshaw-puller, shopkeeper – as long as there was one sentence which he would be required to speak, any role would do.

Dipak had been employed only recently. Also, his was just a part-time job. So far, he had not been in much

proximity with his colleagues. But he did know that the auditions were all in name only. Ultimately, they went to people who begged persistently for a role or to staff artistes, all in the name of curtailing expenditure. Given this, how could he manage a role for a complete non-entity like Prafulla, who, moreover, did not have any theatrical experience?

As for Prafulla, he did not want any payment. In fact, he was more than ready to give them the money in exchange for a role. Once, just once would he talk on the radio ... And his voice would create waves in the air, sound waves that would spread all over the universe, making all radio sets in the world vibrate with his voice ... The very thought was enough to transform him into a sound wave riding the winds.

Unlike others of his age, Prafulla did not have any lover, any beloved. Actually, no girl loved him, whereas the number of girls he loved had already entered the realm of infinity. Reasons? There were many. He was not physically attractive, academically he had just about managed to pass, and he could never participate in students' meetings, cultural functions or shows. His major drawback was his voice. Once, when he was in high school, he had sung while bathing near the well. His mother had rushed out of the kitchen and told the neighbour, "O sister, have you just heard, what vocal cords

God has given my son! Is this what I get in return for my prayers? Just hearing it is enough to drive me crazy.”

The neighbour woman was sympathetic in her response: “Let it be. Should a man’s voice be as shrill as yours and mine? A man is a man. His voice should be sonorous. He’s not going to sing songs and play the harmonium in meetings and gatherings, is he?”

Of course, there was no radio station in Assam then, otherwise she would have said, “He’s not going to sing songs on the radio, is he?”

Prafulla overheard the exchange. That, in any case, was his mother’s intention. He saw the daughters and the daughters-in-law who had come to fetch water looking at him and giggling, covering their mouths with their chador-ends. No doubt, they had heard what his mother had said.

Prafulla had wanted to jump into the well and stay there forever. Of course, he would make arrangements for food inside the well itself. His sense of self-respect ran high, but on the other hand, he didn’t have the courage to jump. His heart trembled whenever he looked into the well, whose depth must have been around twenty-five, thirty feet. So much so that he would look heavenward while drawing water.

That very day he took an oath – a *Bhishma Pratigya* – that he would never ever sing again, under any circumstances. Not only that, he wouldn’t even whistle

or hum a tune or a piece. No, not even a snatch from a Bihu song. He had heard many people say that every man sings a line or two after his marriage in front of his newly wedded wife. This is said to be the bride's first test of the groom. If he did not sing, then she would love him all the more, for her voice would be, at least, a grade better, and she would win. He had read many such stories in the special Bihu editions of numerous magazines. When he marries – aha! Princess of his dreams, dream girl, *kunja-latika*, where would she be now? – even a thousand entreaties from her wouldn't make him sing. Even though it is said that a bride could make a man do anything.

From that day onwards, his musical exercises came to an end. He completed his BA and became a temporary teacher in one of the schools in the village. He thought of studying law once the result was declared, but opted for teaching instead. And till now he has not broken his vow. Once, in a dream he had wanted to sing when, remembering his oath, he had fallen onto the floor and had woken up not only himself but the entire household as well.

He narrated the whole story to Dipak, holding nothing back. The passion with which he told it brought tears to Dipak's eyes. At that moment Prafulla was certain he would give up his life for his dearest friend.

However, it was easier to give up one's life, but not so easy to get an audition call. The radio authorities never invited any artiste from outside Guwahati because it would involve providing travelling and lodging allowances, and so, calling up Prafulla to play the part of a guard was out of the question. Therefore, the same staff artiste who is engaged to play the role of a mother-in-law in the women's programme, *AideorBuloni*, is given a daughter-in-law's part in the next one. Just like in the Hindi movies. There was nothing to stop mother in one play switching over to the role of a wife in the next. The radio could make the same man produce a child's voice in the morning, a youth's at noon, and that of a toothless old man in the evening. Therefore, to get his friend a role, Dipak had to repeatedly beg the drama producer.

The latter was helpless. He could not risk his own job in trying to help a friend, especially at a time when jobs were so hard to come by. Even in the radio, the government was adopting the policy of appointing non-Asomiya persons for Asomiya language programmes. In that case the script of a play ... both tried to think of a solution over a cup of tea. Suddenly the producer started playing the tabla on the table with his right hand. Dipak knew the sign. It was a sign of something good to come. Sometimes problems arose during production – say, the voice of an old woman was required. Drawing up a contract with an old woman would mean fifteen to twenty

rupees, leave aside the expenses during the rehearsal. This expense was always the producer's, the government did not bear it. And here is the solution – Eureka, eureka! Dipak's voice was quite womanly. This was considered to be the chief requirement of an Asomiya radio announcer. He could just utter his dialogues hoarsely. Fortunately, the person acting out the role of an old woman on radio cannot be seen! This is how plays are performed here.

Dipak's face was filled with hope and joy. As long as the tabla played he was assured of the role. He held his breath and waited to hear the solution. He even stopped sipping his unfinished tea. What if the solution vanished while he took a sip?

The producer gulped his tea and lighting a cigarette, said, "Why don't you do one thing?"

"I'll do two, three, a hundred things. I'm ready. Just give me an audition, give him the part of a guard or a sentinel."

"Not so many, just one. Why don't you ask your friend to give your address as his own, or that of someone else in Guwahati? Then, no travelling or boarding allowances would be required. There's going to be an audition the day after tomorrow, an audition for singing and talks."

Dipak sprang up to leave. On his way out he said, "He doesn't need the money, he has enough. He would rather give money to the radio station, in return for a role.

His father has lots of money ...” The rest of his words could not be heard.

When the paper calling him for the voice test was given to him, an emotional Prafulla took it carefully with both hands, mumbling something under his breath. Dipak guessed it must be an expression of gratitude. Dipak himself would not be able to accompany Prafulla to the audition. He would be busy in the announcing booth. Prafulla would have to sit with the other candidates and as soon as his name was called out, go into the studio. He reassured Prafulla and told him not to be nervous in front of the microphone. There was nothing to be afraid of. The courage needed to stand in front of the stuffed tiger in the drawing room was all that was required to speak over a microphone. Perhaps Miss Bimbadhara would be in charge of the audition.

Prafulla, under the pretext of putting his hand in his pocket, clutched his heart which was jumping like the freshwater *sengali* fish caught in a *khaloi*, the handheld bamboo fish-trap. Bimbadhara, what a dangerous name! And a Miss!

Looking wistfully at Dipak, he said, “Won’t you be able to stay with me even for a little while?”

Dipak looked at him and answered that it would not be possible. It was against the rules, and in any case, he did not have the time. And there was nothing to fear in the

name Bimbadhara – her lips were not really red, it was just lipstick. Even though she was a Miss, age-wise she was more than a Mrs, in fact she was grandmotherly.

What had he to fear? What was there to be actually afraid of? He would just have to seek out a companion to talk with for a while.

The audition was at three in the afternoon. But since he knew how fast time could fly, he reached the radio station half an hour earlier. He met one or two people who were returning from the audition. His heart lurched. Surely the audition was not over? The radio station was not going to wait for him alone but it would look very bad if he started running. Artistes do not scurry for auditions. People were in a hurry only to cash cheques, before the bank closed. Still, Prafulla immediately switched over to the dogtrot, something between walking and running, an inherent, instinctive movement in human beings. Wiping his face with his handkerchief, he reached the room meant for candidates and saw that the last prospective artiste, his face flushed, was returning from the audition.

It was still ten minutes to three. But he had been called at three o'clock. It was highly improper of the authorities to have completed the audition already. Enraged, he mentally drafted a letter to the Secretary. Just then he saw a red-lipped woman in a colourful sari coming out through a door, wiping her face with a

handkerchief. A middle-aged bald man who carried something like Bhima's mace on his shoulder, followed. The woman's livid eyes fell upon Prafulla's crestfallen face.

"Oh, my god! There's one more person left. Come, come. Come inside," she said in a strained voice and went in before he could say a word. The man with the mace looked like a stone idol – cruel and lifeless. He stood still, waiting for Prafulla to come closer.

"Is it so? I should be going, is it?" With these words, Prafulla staggered towards the man.

The man directed Prafulla to follow him. They walked down a long corridor, and finally entered a studio. Prafulla was asked to sit on a mattress on the ground. In front was a microphone. He looked at the ground and sat down in a state of confusion. Suddenly a red light glowed on the studio wall. He even heard Bimbadhara's voice above, saying something in English to the control room engineer. Lifting his head, he saw the lady seated directly opposite in another room, separated by a glass partition. She was saying something on the microphone. Startled, he turned around immediately only to see that the gentleman was trying to make some hoarse sounds on that terrifying object. So, that was only a musical instrument.

He looked helplessly at the woman on the other side of the glass wall, like a deer being gradually ensnared in

a net. He saw her lips move but heard nothing. Suddenly the red light went off and from the speaker on the ceiling her voice, like a bullet, pierced his ears. "Sing."

The light was switched on again. The sound behind him took on monstrous proportions. He looked back at the instrumentalist. The expression on his face said the same thing as the voice above. When Prafulla looked as if he had seen a ghost, the man said harshly, "Sing."

Again, the light went off and he was directed from above, "Yes, don't delay. Sing. Another audition follows next."

It was as if Prafulla, like Kumbhakarna, had been suddenly roused from a long sleep. Quickly, he spoke into the mike, "Sing? What does it mean? What'll I sing?"

A voice said, "Don't put your mouth so close to the microphone. Sing from a distance."

Like one suffering from fever, Prafulla was bathed in sweat. He shouted from his seat, "But what will I sing? I don't know how to sing."

The voice said, "Sing whatever you can. And don't shout so much, the microphone will be damaged."

Prafulla wiped himself once more with his handkerchief. Then he wrung it dry and shook it. In a mournful voice, he whispered, "But I know nothing about songs or singing."

"You don't have to know. This is just an audition. One, two lines. Sing whatever you can."



"But ... but it wasn't written that I should come prepared for singing, won't the voice be tested if I just say something?"

Flick. "Only saying something doesn't serve the purpose. That's why you've been asked to sing. We're losing precious time. After this, you won't get a chance for another month. The loss will be yours. The studio will be needed soon. Any song, even the one you sing in your bathroom will do."

Flick again. "I don't sing in the bathroom. I have vowed never to sing. Once, during my childhood, I sang a song beside the well ..."

Flick off. "You may talk about your childhood some other day. But now you'll lose your chance."

Flick. "Lose my chance? Okay, I know some lines from a Hindi song, will that do? *Mere dil ne pukareaaja* ... I don't know the rest, that's the problem."

"Yes, yes. That'll do. Sing that, and make it fast."

"Or will something from a Bihu song... A thorn pricked me as I was building the *japona*, and looking ..."

Both hands on his heart, eyes closed, Prafulla began the Bihu song. Miss Bimbadhara fell off the chair and rolled on the carpet with laughter. The control room engineer immediately turned off the switch. The assistant station director who was also listening to the audition flicked off the speakers and frantically pressed the calling bell. He



was furious with the peon, "Who allowed a motorcycle inside the studio?"

Prafulla was not to be found anywhere. A week later Dipak received a letter informing him that his friend was still alive. Inquiring at the radio station, he learnt that his friend had failed in the voice and would get his next chance only after three months. Furious, he went to Miss Bimbadhara and said, "Why did you fail my friend in the audition?"

"Your friend? My god! Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"Should I have begged just for the role of a guard or a sentry?"

"Oh, my good God! Your friend appeared in the audition for singing. The audition for drama and talk was afterwards. Mr Das was in charge of that."

"For singing? You forced him to sing after calling him for drama? Your job will be on the line. I'll make him file a defamation suit against the radio station."

"Please, please wait. You're making me nervous. Your friend hadn't come for the singing audition? Why did he come during that time?"

"That's no offence. It was your duty to check. My friend had taken a vow never to sing. Once, during his childhood, while singing beside the well ..."

"Wait, he did try to tell us some such story. Please tell me, what happened?"

"What's the use of knowing now? Why didn't you listen to him then?"

"I was upset that day. My nerves were strained after auditioning around fifteen candidates. Do something please. Don't make me lose my job, please, please."

"What's there to do? Pass him, give him a part in a drama, ask for forgiveness. You have made him break his *BhishmaPratigya*. Thankfully, he hasn't committed suicide..."

[Translated by Bibhash Choudhury]


Commentary:

Mahim Bora's "Audition" is a story of human aspiration and desire for recognition which is thwarted by circumstances. At the centre of the story is the character of Prafulla, a young man who nurtures a dream of transmitting his voice through radio, a dream for which he is willing to go to any length or to do anything. Alongside this dream, there is a parallel circumstance whose antecedents lie in an experience in his childhood. Once, when he was in high school, Prafulla ventured to sing while bathing near the well. His singing, however, wasn't of the kind that could be listened to without evoking shock and surprise – this was because his was a voice that was simply unlistenable. His mother wondered how his son could have such a voice, so ungainly which made

even Prafulla realise that he was never made for singing. When he heard the response of his mother and her fellow listener he made a vow, one which he promised never to break – that he would never sing again in life – whatever the circumstances. This was his *BhishmaPratigya*, his irrevocable vow. Although this may appear to be a minor development in an individual's life, for Prafulla it was of vital importance. Even though his aspiration to become a singer was stonewalled for life, Prafulla carried another desire within him: he wanted to have his voice heard on the radio. This could be for a moment, even if it was by playing the smallest of parts in a radio play, or in any other way, he just wanted his desire to be fulfilled. In order to see this dream become reality, Prafulla came to his friend Dipak's house in Guwahati. Prafulla's single-minded focus on his goal was immediately apparent to Dipak. This was evident in the way Prafulla kept on insisting for an audition for any role in a play, or for a talk on the radio. For Dipak, whose position as an announcer was not permanent, securing a spot for the audition was not an easy task. Although Dipak was aware of the difficulty, he also realised Prafulla's passionate desire for an audition. Viewed from a perspective where knowledge about Prafulla's situation was not available, his insistence would appear to be illogical, and could also be construed as inexplicable. This was because Prafulla did not have any

antecedents which would lead one to believe that he was suited for auditioning for the radio. For someone with a voice or talent suited for performance, such a desire to be heard is understandable. But in the case of Prafulla, there was no evidence for such an impression to be formed. Moreover, his desire for audition was coupled with any wish for remunerative gain. He did not seek any monetary return for any voice rendering that he did for the radio. In other words, Prafulla sought only the experience of having had some air time on the radio, for which an audition was essential. His desperation for an audition became frenzied and although Dipak knew that he couldn't manage it for Prafulla as quickly as was desired, it was something that wasn't out of range. After all, it was only an audition that was being sought. An audition is not necessarily a confirmation of a radio slot; an audition was a test of voice and tonal quality, along with that of pitch, and modulation. Once the audition was done, the assessment was carried out in accordance with the standard parameters for given purposes such as acting, singing, rendition or a talk for which the individual was allotted specific slots. Usually, aspirants who sought to be auditioned awaited their turns for different activities and when the opportunity came, they made their presentations. So, when Prafulla eventually received his opportunity, he was asked to make a presentation.

Because he arrived prior to the scheduled 3 p.m. slot, those who were involved in auditioning presumed that Prafulla had come for singing. When he asked to sing a song, he was completely taken aback. It was a dilemma for which he was not at all prepared. On the one hand, it was his lifelong dream to have an audition, and on the other, when the opportunity presented itself, he was being compelled to break his irrevocable vow of not singing again. Left with no choice and with no time to explain his dilemma, Prafulla started singing. It was an unmitigated disaster. He was stopped in the midst of his singing, and having lost both credibility and the only chance of realising his dream, Prafulla left the scene. It was an instance of supreme irony that his aspirational dream was transformed into his gravest nightmare, that too in front of the people he had sought to impress. Not only was his vow broken, his hope of realising his dream was shattered beyond recovery. Mahim Bora brings to the narrative the unspeakably difficult and traumatic experience of an individual who had none to share his sense of defeat with. His desire for recognition by society ended up exposing his weakness. The deep, psychological hurt caused by this experience was not subsumable in words. Subtly evoked, and narrated with a consummate understanding of situational factors, Mahim Bora's "Audition" is one of his landmark creative works. ○



Bryan MacMahon

The Ring

I should like you to have known my grandmother. She was my mother's mother, and as I remember her she was a widow with a warm farm in the Kickham country in Tipperary. Her land was on the southern slope of a hill, and there it drank in the sun which, to me, seemed always to be balanced on the teeth of the Galtees. Each year I spent the greater part of my summer holidays at my grandmother's place. It was a great change for me to leave our home in a bitter sea-coast village in Kerry and visit my grandmother's. Why, man, the grass gone to waste on a hundred yards of the roadside in Tipperary was as much as you'd find in a dozen of our sea-poisoned fields. I always thought it a pity to see all that fine grass go to waste by the verge of the road. I think so still.

Although my Uncle Con was married, my grandmother held the whip hand in the farm. At the particular time I am trying to recall, the first child was in the cradle. (Ah, how time has galloped away! That child is now a nun in a convent on the Seychelles Islands.) My Uncle Con's wife, my Aunt Annie, was a gentle, delicate girl who was only charmed in herself to have somebody to assume the responsibility of the place. Which was just as well indeed, considering the nature of woman my grandmother was. Since that time when her husband's horse had walked into the farmyard unguided, with my grandfather, Martin Dermody, dead in the body of the car, her heart had turned to stone in her breast. Small wonder to that turning, since she was left with six young children—five girls and one boy, my Uncle Con. But she faced the world bravely and did well by them all. Ah! but she was hard, main hard.

Once at a race-meeting I picked up a jockey's crop. When I balanced it on my palm it reminded me of my grandmother. Once I had a twenty-two-pound salmon laced to sixteen feet of CastleConnell greenheart; the rod reminded me of my grandmother. True, like crop and rod, she had an element of flexibility, but like them there was no trace of fragility. Now after all these years I cannot recall her person clearly; to

me she is but something tall and dark and austere. But lately I see her character with a greater clarity. Now I understand things that puzzled me when I was a boy. Towards me she displayed a certain black affection. Oh, but I made her laugh warmly once. That was when I told her of the man who had stopped me on the road beyond the limekiln and asked me if I were a grandson of Martin Dermody. Inflating with a shy pride, I had told him that I was. He then gave me a shilling and said, "Maybe you're called Martin after your grandfather?" "No," I said, "I'm called Con after my Uncle Con." It was then my grandmother had laughed a little warmly. But my Uncle Con caught me under the armpits, tousled my hair and said I was a clever Kerry rascal.

The solitary occasion on which I remember her to have shown emotion was remarkable. Maybe remarkable isn't the proper word; obscene would be closer to the mark. Obscene I would have thought of it then, had I known the meaning of the word. Today I think it merely pathetic.

How was it that it all started? Yes, there was I with my bare legs trailing from the heel of a loaded hayfloat. I was watching the broad silver parallels we were leaving in the clean after-grass. My Uncle Con was standing in the front of the float guiding the mare.

Drawing in the hay to the hayshed we were. Already we had a pillar and a half of the hayshed filled. My grandmother was up on the hay, forking the lighter trusses. The servant-boy was handling the heavier forkfuls. A neighbour was throwing it up to them.

When the float stopped at the hayshed I noticed that something was amiss. For one thing the man on the hay was idle, as indeed was the man on the ground. My grandmother was on the ground, looking at the hay with cold calculating eyes. She turned to my Uncle Con.

"Draw in no more hay, Con," she said. "I've lost my wedding ring."

"Where? In the hay?" he queried.

"Yes, in the hay."

"But I thought you had a keeper?"

"I've lost the keeper, too. My hands are getting thin."

"The story could be worse," he commented.

My grandmother did not reply for a little while. She was eyeing the stack with enmity.

"'Tis in that half-pillar," she said at last.

"I must look for it."

"You've a job before you, mother," said Uncle Con.

She spoke to the servant-boy and the neighbour.
"Go down and shake out those couple of pikes at the

end of the Bog Meadow," she ordered. "They're heating in the centre."

"Can't we be drawing in to the idle pillar, mother?" my Uncle Con asked gently.

"No, Con," she answered. "I'll be putting the hay from the middle pillar there."

The drawing-in was over for the day. That was about four o'clock in the afternoon. Before she tackled the half-pillar, my grandmother went down on her hands and knees and started to search the loose hay in the idle pillar. She searched wisp by wisp, even sop by sop. My Uncle Con beckoned to me to come away. Anyway, we knew she'd stop at six o'clock. "Six to six" was her motto for working hours. She never broke that rule.

That was a Monday evening. On Tuesday we offered to help—my Uncle Con and I. She was down on her knees when we asked her. "No, no," she said abruptly. Then, by way of explanation, when she saw that we were crestfallen: "You see, if we didn't find it I'd be worried that ye didn't search as carefully as ye should, and I'd have no peace of mind until I had searched it all over again." So she worked hard all day, breaking off only for her meals and stopping sharp at six o'clock.

By Wednesday evening she had made a fair gap in the hay but had found no ring. Now and again during

the day we used to go down to see if she had had any success. She was very wan in the face when she stopped in the evening.

On Thursday morning her face was still more strained and drawn. She seemed reluctant to leave the rick even to take her meals. What little she ate seemed like so much dust in her mouth. We took down tea to her several times during the day.

By Friday the house was on edge. My Uncle Con spoke guardedly to her at dinner-time. "This will set us back a graydle, mother," he said. "I know, son; I know, son; I know," was all she said in reply.

~~✓~~ Saturday came and the strain was unendurable. About three o'clock in the afternoon she found the keeper. We had been watching her in turns from the kitchen window. I remember my uncle's face lighting up and his saying, "Glory, she's found it!"

But he drew a long breath when again she started burrowing feverishly in the hay. Then we knew it was only the keeper. We didn't run out at all. We waited till she came in at six o'clock. There were times between three and six when our three heads were together at the small window watching her. I was thinking she was like a mouse nibbling at a giant's loaf.

At six she came in and said, "I found the keeper." After her tea she couldn't stay still. She fidgeted around the kitchen for an hour or so. Then, "Laws were made

to be broken," said my grandmother with a brittle bravery, and she stalked out to the hayshed. Again, we watched her.

Coming on for dusk she returned and lighted a stable lantern and went back to resume her search. Nobody crossed her. We didn't say yes, aye or no to her. After a time, my Uncle Con took her heavy coat off the rack and went down and threw it across her shoulders. I was with him. "There's a touch of frost there tonight, mother," said my Uncle Con.

We loitered for a while in the darkness outside the ring of her lantern's light. But she resented our pitying eyes so we went in. We sat around the big fire waiting—Uncle Con, Aunt Annie and I. That was the lonely waiting—without speaking—just as if we were waiting for an old person to die or for a child to come into the world. Near twelve we heard her step on the cobbles. 'Twas typical of my grandmother that she placed the lantern on the ledge of the dresser and quenched the candle in it before she spoke to us.

"I found it," she said. The words dropped out of her drawn face. "Get hot milk for my mother, Annie," said Uncle Con briskly.

My grandmother sat by the fire, a little to one side. Her face was as cold as death. I kept watching her like a hawk but her eyes didn't even flicker. The wedding ring was inside its keeper, and my

grandmother kept twirling it round and round with the fingers of her right hand.

Suddenly, as if ashamed of her finger's betrayal, she hid her hands under her check apron. Then, unpredictably, the fists under the apron came up to meet her face, and her face bent down to meet the fists in the apron. "Oh, Martin, Martin," she sobbed, and then she cried like the rain.

Notes:

Tis: shortened form of 'it is'

the teeth of the Galtees: the reference is to the heights of the Galtee mountain range, in Munster, Ireland, whose sharpness is compared with the terrain where the narrator's grandmother's house was located

Kickham country in Tipperary: Tipperary is a county in Ireland; Kickham here refers to the location where the narrator's grandmother used to live; Tipperary is in the province of Munster

Kerry: County Kerry, where the narrator's home was, is also in the province of Munster, Ireland

jockey's crop: 'crop' is a firm rod used by jockeys during horse racing

Seychelles Islands: an archipelago in the Indian Ocean

Castle Connell greenheart: a fishing rod named after the location in County Limerick, Ireland; 'greenheart' is considered to be a firm willow from which wooden fishing rods are made

limekiln: a kiln where lime processing is done through calcination; a kiln is a type of an oven used for heating purposes; depending on the type of material processed

the ring's keeper: the 'keeper' is an outer ring covering the actual ring, which together made the ring set; the ring and keeper were seen as a collective unit, and was usually ceremoniously considered to be the precious gift given to the spouse during the wedding

Commentary:

Bryan MacMahon's "The Ring" is a story told from the perspective of a young man, who recollects his memory of his grandmother's loss and recovery of her wedding ring in a haystack. He recounts one of his visits to his grandmother's home long ago. During that time, she lived with the narrator's uncle, Uncle Con. A woman whose firm personality exuded command and resoluteness, she had a strong hold over everything that went on in the household. This is clear when the narrator states: "my grandmother held the whip hand in the farm." Within the limited frame of the narrative,

MacMahon presents an emotionally charged world of a family known for its discipline. From the account provided by the narrator, we come to know that Martin Dermody, the husband of his grandmother, had passed away quite some time ago. The nature of the relationship between his grandmother and grandfather is not distinctively apparent to the narrator, and from the firmness of his grandmother's character, he presumed that she was unwavering in her approach to life. Regarding her strength of character, the narrator observes: "like crop and rod, she had an element of flexibility, but like them there was no trace of fragility." Her personality did not yield any display of emotion and there was no occasion, except one, when the narrator saw her give way to her feelings. He calls this incident "remarkable", and goes on to say that with hindsight, the whole episode appeared to him to be an experience of pathos. This incident took place one day on a Monday evening when the narrator's grandmother lost her ring in the midst of hay. As a farming family, hay trussing was one of the activities that Uncle Con was involved in, the process being controlled by his mother who set fixed rules for the purpose. One such norm concerned working hours, which were designated as 'six to six.' On this particular Monday, the grandmother's ring was lost amidst the

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hay. When the loss was detected, grandmother stopped work, and focussed on the search for the lost item. Finding a ring in a haystack which occupied a considerably large area was almost out of the bounds of possibility. Grandmother, however, did not give up, and all through the week, she continued the search for the ring. Eventually, towards the end of the week, she found the keeper of the ring. The ring was found on Saturday at twelve midnight. For a woman who followed strict discipline and maintained extreme punctuality, the break away from routine was completely out of character. After having found the ring, grandmother broke down emotionally, and called out the name of her husband. This was indeed 'remarkable' and showed her deep sense of attachment to her deceased husband. The story shows that sternness and emotion can coexist, even though how it is manifested will differ from person to person. The extreme sway of feeling from an iron-willed woman to someone who displayed her vulnerability when it came to the only symbol that connected her to her husband shows how fluctuating human emotions can be. Grandmother's conscious hiding of her finger can be interpreted as her refusal to exhibit her emotional state of mind. She kept her own emotions to herself and felt that any display of feeling publicly would dent her image of a stern, confident woman. ○

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2023**FYUGP B.A./B.Sc./BCA/B.Voc. 1st Semester Examination****Subject-AEC English
Paper- Alternative English****Time- 1.5 hours****Full Marks- 30****1. Answer the following questions : 1x5=5**

- (a) Name the poet of So many Oaks.
- (b) Who was Prafulla's friend?
- (c) What is the name of the grandfather in the story, The Ring?
- (d) Who was Maud Gonne?
- (e) Identify the literary device used repeatedly in the poem, Palanquin Bearers.

2. Answer any 5 questions from the following : 2x5=10

- (a) Name the two trees found in the poem, This is a Photograph of Me.
- (b) What are the two birds we find in the short story, Audition by Mahim Bora?
- (c) Narrate the drawback of Prafulla.
- (d) Discuss the condition of grandmother after losing the ring.
- (e) What does the term 'witch' signify in the poem, So Many Oaks?
- (f) Write a note on the idea of class division in the poem, the Palanquin Bearers.
- (g) What is the theme of the poem, No Second Troy?

P.T.O.

- (h) Discuss the role of Uncle Con in the household.
 - (i) Do you think that the title of the poem, No Second Troy is apt?
 - (j) Appreciate the idea of using colors as symbols in So Many Oaks.
3. Answer any 3 questions from the following : 3x5=15
- (a) Write a critical appreciation of the poem, This is a Photograph of Me.
 - (b) Narrate the end of musical exercise of Prafulla.
 - (c) Discuss the relationship of the grandmother with her husband with reference to the ring.
 - (d) Write a note on the condition of the palanquin bearers.
 - (e) Why did the woman choose to live by the oak forest?
 - (f) Examine the subject of love and peace in the poem, No Second Troy.

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